

LEARNING DISABILITIES: AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHILD HEALTH INSTITUTE READING RESEARCH PROGRAM

Ms. April Burton

MS. BURTON: I am here today representing the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. I am a parent of three children, all in the elementary grades, who attend the Prince George's County Public School System. I am also a member of the PTA Executive Board and a member of the Parent Team on our School Planning and Management Team.

This afternoon I would like to talk to you about the most recognized learning disability in the year 2000, which is the reading disability.

Historically and currently, the definition of learning disabilities has not provided sufficient clarity to guide classification, education, and research efforts so that we can better help our children. The term "learning disabilities" or "LD" gained quick reference in the '60s and '70s because it addressed a critical educational need in the eyes of concerned teachers and parents. It is identical to the concept of unexpected underachievement, which means that the child with the learning disability has a problem in one of these areas: listening, speaking, reading, writing, or developing mathematical skills that match their potential even though there has been an ample opportunity to learn.

A child with a learning disability might have great strengths in some areas but difficulties in one or more areas in basic reading, math, or learning skills. For example, some children are great in math and music but just cannot read. Learning disabilities are categorized within the seven following areas: listening, speaking, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, arithmetic calculation, mathematics, and written expression.

We have research centers located at Yale University, the University of Colorado, the University of Washington, and Georgetown University. These research centers are studying school-aged children as well as adults with reading difficulties. These studies are no longer for enrollment right now, but we will continue to follow participants until the year 2005. There may be new ones after the year 2005, but we do not know yet when or where the studies will be conducted.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development has focused the majority of its studies on three questions: How do children learn to read? Why do some children have difficulties learning to read? And how we can prevent and remediate reading difficulties?

Children need to learn how to read because reading is a necessary element for success in today's world. When children do not learn to read well, they are limited in what they can do in other areas. They have decreased self-esteem, self-concept, and motivation. Their potential is also limited for higher education, vocational options, and other opportunities.

Basically, if a child does not learn how to read or is unable to grasp the concept it will lead to many of the problems that are categorized, within the seven areas of learning disabilities, but for this afternoon, we will put our focus into what it takes to teach a child to learn how to read.

I would now like to show you a video that was produced from the Yale and Syracuse University Learning Disabilities Research Centers. In this video you will see real children. The video came about because the children wanted to show people how it looks and feels not to be able to read and how good it feels when they learn how. The children actually did some of the filming themselves, and a professional fixed it up a bit to turn it into a high-quality film.

(Video presentation.)

MS. BURTON: As you can see from the video, it is critical to provide children with reading instruction as early as possible in their school career to avoid the reading and school failure that will most likely occur if we do not. If you wait to help until children are nine years old to help them, then the majority of them do not learn to read well. But that does not mean that they cannot learn how. It is partly because they have been allowed to fail. Their motivation and self-esteem is so low that it takes longer to teach them how to read, and then it becomes a much more difficult task. Even if they do at that point learn how to read, they may never enjoy or love to read.

Print awareness is knowing what the job of reading is. For example, how to hold a book the correct way. Knowing that when you read that you read from the left to the right. The alphabetic principle is learning that letters represent the sounds of speech as well as knowing the right sounds of the language.

To take it one step further, to match the print with the alphabet. For example, when a child learns to read their name on a piece of paper they come to the realization that those—that that print, those alphabetic words, really mean something.

Phonemic awareness is understanding that the language is made up of sounds.

Phonics is the ability to understand that printed words are made up of sounds. Reading fluency is reading quickly and fluently. If children cannot read quickly, by the time they get to the end of sentence, as you saw in the movie, they have already forgotten what they have read. Smooth reading takes practice with words that they already know.

Comprehension is being able to comprehend what you have read in order to understand and explain what you have read.

Motivation is when children want to read and like what they read.

Children must be aware and realize that sounds can be segmented to understand that the symbols on paper make real words, which is the foundation for reading fluency and comprehension. Because the spoken language is seamless, the beginning reader must learn to impose the seams on speech, unloose the sounds from one another, and learn which sounds correspond to which letters or letter patterns.

For example, when we say the word "cat" our ears only hear one sound, not the three sounds as in "c" "a" "t". These sounds, also called phonemes, are actually bundled together when we talk to connect the rapid communication. When the word "cat" is spoken, the "a" and the "t" sound are folded together and pronounced almost at the same time with the "c" sound.

This is what we know about reading: It is really not easy for a child to learn how to read. Just as in any learned skill, children become aware of phonemes in speech at different speeds and levels of ability and accomplishment.

First of all, by prevention, I mean, that we need to get to the problem before it happens. For many children, reading problems can be prevented if they are instructed early at home and with reliable reading instruction programs in schools. There is reliable research that tells us that without early intervention, the poor first grade reader almost always will continue to be the poor middle school, high school, and adult reader.

Secondly, by remediation, I mean that after the reading difficulty is discovered, parents and teachers need to take the necessary steps at home and within the school to try to alleviate that difficulty by covering the areas needed for children to learn how to read. Then we need to figure out if that actually is the problem or if the problem comes from another cause.

The children that need to catch up will require an extraordinary amount of

intensive and costly remediation programs in order to do so. So the one major solution to the problem of reading in particular and general school failure is early identification and intervention for a child who has trouble learning to read.

As parents, we need to engage our children in early literacy experiences to help them to develop an awareness of sound structure and language patterns. For example, we need to read to our young children either at a quiet time or during bedtime while they are sitting in our lap. Engage them in word and language play such as rhyming games. For example, the songs that kids play while they are jumping rope or outside running around. We need to explain things that are going on in the story that we are reading to them so that they can understand why things are happening in the story the way that they are. The children who are at the most risk for reading failure are the ones who enter kindergarten and the early elementary grades without these stimulating learning experiences.

Reading programs should be designed to teach the necessary skills to learn how to read, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension. Teachers should be trained in reading development, reading difficulties, and the structure of the English language.

This is what good readers need: phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, and good phonics skills. But phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, although not necessary for reading comprehension, are not enough.

Children with early reading difficulties enter the early grades lacking adequate chronological processing with word reading skills, which limit their ability to learn to read the text in a fluent fashion. Children need to be able to sound words out, look at the letters, and know what the words are.

Good comprehenders are able to link the concepts and ideas that are in print to their own experiences. They have developed the necessary vocabulary to make sense of what they are reading and are characterized by having the ability to summarize what they are reading, to use their prediction skills, and to guide their comprehension by asking themselves questions.

The best thing that we can do for our children today is to teach them to read and enjoy it. Not only for work purposes but also for pleasure. Children learn to read so that they can read to learn. If you have any questions, I am open for them right now.

There are handouts over there not only of the overhead presentation but also of the

article that was mentioned.

(Member of audience not at microphone asks a question.) (Inaudible).

MS. BURTON: Well, basically my focus today was on how to teach children how to read because if they get the necessary steps then they should be able to, but, if not, then we need to look at other things.

(Member of audience not at microphone asks a question.) (Inaudible).

MS. BURTON: We also have a reading research packet that we send out from the office, which has about 32 to 37 different publications that cover all different types of learning disabilities and disorders, including reading. If you would like to get a copy of that packet, please give me your address, and we can send one out to you. Or you can call me at the office at 301-402-5261, and I will be happy to get those materials out to you.

(Member of audience not at microphone asks a question.) (Inaudible).

MS. BURTON: The reading research packet. And as I was saying earlier, the handouts and the article, the publication that was mentioned, and the video "Why Children Succeed or Fail at Reading" are in your handouts, and if you would like to order the film, the video that was shown, that also is included in your handouts.

Any more questions?

Well, I would like to thank you all.

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